

## Reflections: I encourage you to read this in full...



**From** Henry Rock <contact\_point@citystartuplabs.com>  
**To** <sjohnston@tuesdayforumcharlotte.org>  
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**“Today, I stand, not as a  
victim of my past, but as a  
survivor who has  
embraced the opportunity for  
redemption.”**

**-Melanie Ruona**

*Melanie Ruona is a graduate of the Restorative Pathways project. She wrote and delivered this speech at the graduation ceremony on Friday, August 11, 2023. Her words are a testament to the impact of the work that we do. We encourage you to read it in its entirety.*

Today, I stand before you as a living testament to the power of transformation, the unwavering spirit of hope, and the boundless potential within us all. My journey, marked by addiction, incarceration, and single motherhood, has not been without its trials, but it has also been a testament to the incredible strength of the human spirit. A few years ago, my life was engulfed in darkness. Addiction had taken hold, leading me down a destructive path to incarceration. In those moments of despair, I made a pivotal choice-confronting my past, learning, and rebuilding my life.

The Restorative Pathways Project emerged as the beacon of hope I so desperately needed. It wasn't just a program; it was a lifeline. Through it, I found mentors who believed in me when I could barely believe in myself. I discovered a community of individuals who had faced similar struggles and we're determined to find a different way. My journey wasn't easy. It demanded unwavering dedication and a willingness to confront the shadows of my past. I dug deep within myself to address the root causes of my addiction and criminal history. Along the way, I acquired invaluable life skills, gained an education, and developed tools necessary for my reintegration into society.

But my journey also encompassed the role of a single mother. Balancing the responsibilities of parenthood with my recovery and education was no small feat. My children inspired me, motivating me to strive for a better life. I wanted to set an example, to demonstrate that no matter how far you fall, you can always rise again. Today, I stand before you, not as a victim of my past, but as a survivor who has embraced the opportunity for redemption. I am proud to say that I have overcome addiction, broken free from the cycle of crime, and emerged from this program with honor. As I look ahead, I am grateful for the chance to embark on a career at Atrium Health an institution dedicated to healing and compassion.

My story is not unique. It is a testament to the power of restorative justice, the potential for change that resides within us all, and the support and encouragement that can make all the difference. I am here as a symbol of second chances, of redemption, and of hope. I want to extend my deepest gratitude to my mentors, the dedicated faculty, my fellow graduates, and, most importantly to my family who stood by me through thick and thin. You believed in me when I couldn't believe in myself, and I am eternally thankful for that.

*"Let us embrace the opportunities that lie ahead, knowing that we have the strength to overcome any obstacle."*

My life's mission is grounded in profound transformation, rising from the depths of adversity, and emerging as a symbol of fortitude and tenacity. As a single mother, my dedication extends to nurturing my children's educational growth, providing unwavering support, and homeschooling them to equip them with the tools they need to thrive. In my family and community, I aspire to be a reliable source of assistance and guidance, particularly to those who can benefit from my experiences and compassionate perspective. My journey has been marked by the humble recognition that, even during life's most demanding challenges, there's an opportunity for growth and a chance to emerge stronger. I've faced my share of tribulations, including tragic losses of two of my sons which once led me down a path of addiction and involvement in the correctional system. These experiences have instilled in me the belief in the power of healing and personal transformation.

My life's purpose is to inspire others by demonstrating that one can emerge as a force, compassionate and invincible in the face of life's most difficult challenges. Through sharing my story and leveraging my experiences, I plan to uplift my community, promote education and empowerment, and create a nurturing environment where healing, support, and personal growth are attainable for all. Ultimately, I seek to leave a lasting legacy of love, humility, determination, and belief that there is always a path forward, even when the journey is tough. I desire to create a future for my children, overflowing with hope and a boundless passion for life's simple joys.

As we move forward from this moment, let us remember that our past does not define us. The choices we make today and the actions we take tomorrow shape our future. Let us embrace the opportunities that lie ahead, knowing that we have the strength to overcome any obstacle. Thank you, and congratulations to my fellow graduates. Our journey is just beginning, and I am excited to see where it leads us. Together, we can continue to write stories of determination, resilience, and hope. Our futures are filled with limitless possibilities, and I can't wait to see how each of us contributes to improving the world.

We know that we could not continue this work without you, thank you.

*With Gratitude ~*

*Henry Rock*



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9319 Robert D. Snyder Rd.  
Charlotte, NC 28262, United States

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